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Essay by Caitlin Scarano

Finalist for the 2018 Talking Writing Prize for Personal Essay



This morning, wood stove smoke mixes with fall fog. I watch the river for signs of how it will flood as it leaves these mountains for the Salish. I live in northwest Washington now but grew up in southeastern Virginia, the Piedmont Region. I remember Virginia in summer—moving through humidity like wading through brackish water. There were so many bugs back then—fleas, lice, deer ticks. Horseflies biting as my sisters and I swam in the reservoir. Our father watched from the shore, sipping whiskey and singing James Taylor songs to no one, certainly not us.

I read recently that the core of repulsion is recognition.

Even the nights wouldn't cool off. When I was home after my first year of college, I'd sneak Camels in the driveway, out of view of my mother's bedroom. That was the summer she told me the man she'd really always loved wasn't my father. Of all the things I blame her for, that is not one of them.

She remembers the exact spot on the unlined country road where she pulled over when I called two years ago to tell her I wasn't sure how to keep living. That was the year with two faces—one watched me with ready teeth, the other looked away. I kept on living, though, came west. In Washington, I dream of pulling a baby from a churning wood stove. I dream of peeling mildew off my skin in gray-green strips.

My partner asks what Virginia was like. I want to say it's like a song I don't like but can't stop singing. In the summer, men and machines macerated the field between our startled house and the railroad tracks, raked the grass into tight bales the shape of marshmallows. In September, my sisters and I climbed the bales, pulled ourselves up by the golden twine like mountaineers. We watched the sun sink, an egg yolk behind the trees.

In this field, we were stalked by the women we'd become, shadowless foxes. One carried a box cutter and a fistful of red-doll hair. Another carried a daughter. The last had nothing but an empty mother-blue pitcher. Like archaic clockwork, Norfolk Southern cars carried coal from the Blue Ridge to the sea. Ethos of industry, towns that ripen and then rot in the wake.

I used to believe time was a line.

On the first day of deer season, the boys were allowed to miss school, while the rest of us sat in those desks as if strapped in. Each July, the local fathers reenacted Lee's Retreat in that field. Our mother watched my sisters and me watch the men rehearse. We yawned, slapped at flies, already unmoved by the pageantries of masculinity. Such war games. *If you're shot, you have to stay down*, I heard one of them yell. *Those are the fucking rules*.

I still have a shoebox of horseflies, a history of hammers snapped at the neck, secrets whispered through a screen door. It was summer once—we were children. Waist-deep in the places we weren't allowed. At church, I was told to sit very still, like a baby rabbit in clover. Behind the twisted magnolia, my best friend's cousin made her undress for him, called her a name no one has said since. I imagine she can still smell the rotting eggshell-white petals, still taste his unbrushed teeth. The summer we turned fifteen, she showed me the headstone of her older sister, the one her mother's first husband shook to death. The summer we turned sixteen, we swam a mile across Lake Gaston and nearly drowned. That night we returned to the water, swam naked under a full moon.

We were all children once—Virginia splitting apart each thread of my hair while I gnawed on a corn cob, listened for a lull in the fighting of blue jays.

There are things I'm trying not to mention—the time I held myself under at the Fort Pickett pool until the world was all popped balloons of color. Or the mapped heart chambers of the twelve-point whitetail our neighbor killed from the deer stand I mistook for a tree house, the morning I watched him drain the blood.

What was it like? Dense, it was so dense back then. A world of white-and-black dairy cows knee-deep in grass, tobacco fields for miles, kudzu smothering a hillside, and abandoned silos like watchtowers. It is a place that seems to give so much—fertile countryside dense with this country's history and generations of old families like taproots. But really, it takes more than it provides. A deceptively bucolic landscape hides households brimming with desperation, prejudice, and violence.

The tall grass where we walked between waiting copperheads. The menagerie of beasts who taught me what I am.

There were horses a half-mile away. My sisters and I used to take them bitter apples from the trees we inherited. They were always very careful with their teeth, and we were careful to push our palms skyward.

Art Information

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Caitlin Scarano is a poet based in northwest Washington. She holds a PhD in English (creative writing) from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and an MFA in poetry from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She was selected as a participant in the NSF's Antarctic Artists & Writers Program and spent November 2018 at McMurdo Station in Antarctica. Her debut collection of poems, *Do Not Bring Him Water*, was released in Fall 2017 by Write Bloody Publishing. Her recent work has appeared in *Fugue*, *Carve*, *Hobart*, and *Poetry Northwest*.

Here's what she told us about this "place-based" essay:

I now live in northwest Washington on the edge of the North Cascades National Park. It is remote, beautiful, and damp country. I am about as far (in the continental US) as I can get from the small town in Virginia where I grew up. From here, I tried to remember what Virginia was for me. What I discovered is that so much of the environment, the place, is bound up with history, gender, family, racism, and violence. About a week ago, I flew back into the United States after a month at McMurdo Station in Antarctica. People often describe Antarctica in extremes—harsh, desolate, brutal or pristine, beautiful, and otherworldly. But how we think and talk about a place often reveals more about ourselves than the place.

For more information, visit [Caitlin Scarano's website](#) [5] or [@coscarano](#) [6] on Twitter.

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